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SUBJECT: SERBIA: NEW SANDZAK MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS FACE OLD
PROBLEMS

REF: BELGRADE 279

Summary

¶1. (SBU) New municipal governments in Serbia's predominantly Muslim southwestern Sandzak region are optimistic that their ties to the national coalition government will pay off in both political support and state funds. These political alliances, though helpful, may not be enough for the region to address its economic and security realities and allow it to become a viable corner in Serbia's pro-European strategy. Several municipalities in the region may be left further behind due to their own political inertia or their decision to install radical governments. Like its multi-ethnic residents and wild terrain, the Sandzak and its challenges are not singularly definable; normalizing the region will take a long-term commitment from both its municipal leaders and their allies in Belgrade. End Summary.

Novi Pazar: Counting the Damage of Prior Misrule

¶2. (SBU) In Novi Pazar, the Bosniak Sandzak Democratic Party (SDP) and the local United Serb List composed of Radicals (SRS) Socialists (SPS) the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) and New Serbia (NS), formed the new municipal government, ending a decade of strong arm rule by former mayor Sulejman Ugljanin and his Sandzak Democratic Action Party (SDA) (reftel). Novi Pazar's new mayor Mirsad Djerlek (SDP) told us on July 21 that his administration took control of literally empty offices after the former mayor and his SDA compatriots swiped nearly everything -- including much of the furniture -- out the back door of the administration building. Djerlek told us that the immediate task for his new government was determining the extent of the damage caused by Ugljanin's administration. Nearly 8 million Euros worth of previously unknown municipal debt had already been discovered, Djerlek said. He planned to ask the national Ministry for State Administration and Self Governance to further investigate the matter. The new government was also trying to determine the number of employees on the municipality's payroll and their technical capabilities, Djerlek said, expressing frustration that he did not even have an email account nearly a week after taking office. In spite of the difficulties, Djerlek said he was committed to being the mayor of all citizens, regardless of their political affiliations or ethnicity. In a statement to the press, Djerlek called on all qualified individuals to work with the new city government in Novi Pazar.

¶3. (SBU) Djerlek said his main priorities were making the city administration more accessible to citizens, economic development, and job creation. He said both SDP and its coalition partner Serbian List shared that agenda, which was confirmed by assembly speaker Milan Veselinovic (SRS) and deputy mayor Vujica Tiosavljevic (NS). Djerlek said he strongly believed that SDP's role in the national government would be a benefit to Novi Pazar. Although

their parties are not in the national government, both Veselinovic and Tiosavljevic believed SDP's connection to Belgrade would benefit the city. Veselinovic also said he expected Novi Pazar's new government to be a further example of SRS's ability to properly and effectively govern. While the SRS has not yet shown this capability in Novi Pazar, Djerlek confirmed that Veselinovic had thus far been "constructive."

Tutin: Diaspora and Smuggling Fuels Economy

14. (SBU) In the highland municipality of Tutin, Ugljanin's SDA again won an overwhelming majority and formed the local government. Semsudin Kucevic of SDA was re-elected to a fourth term as mayor. Kucevic told us on July 22 that his government would continue to make economic development his priority. He said that almost 40% of Tutin's residents lived abroad and were responsible for the financial remittances which were fueling the town's growth, noting the construction of awkwardly large high rises in the town's small center. Kucevic, citing SDA's role in the national government, said he wanted to create an environment conducive to bringing other investors to Tutin. Kucevic acknowledged, however, that the town's isolated location on the borders of Kosovo and Montenegro made it a thoroughfare for smuggling and the security concerns that accompany such activities.

Security in the Sandzak: Who's to Blame?

15. (SBU) Although local Bosniak politicians in both Novi Pazar and Tutin believed the security situation between parties was relatively stable, religious leaders and the region's small Serb minority expressed concerns. With the two major Bosniak parties, SDA and

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SDP, in the national governing coalition, the likelihood of political tensions has dramatically decreased. Both SDP and SDA have publicly stated their commitment to political and national reconciliation of the Bosniak community, but their actions have lagged behind than their words.

16. (SBU) The ongoing conflict within the Islamic community (reftel) continues to cause security concerns in the region. Feuding "Reis" (local Islamic leader) Adem Zilkic told us on July 21 that he felt under constant threat from his religious adversary Mufti Muamer Zukorlic. Zilkic told us that since the elections and the departure of his political patron Ugljanin from Novi Pazar, he had no access to independent media, which he said was now controlled by Zukorlic. Zilkic also cited a recent case in which local police stopped one of Zukorlic's bodyguards for illegally carrying a firearm but quickly released him from custody. Imam Dudic, Dean of Zukorlic's Islamic faculty rejected the accusations and told us on July 21 that recent elections in the Islamic Community in Serbia had reelected Zukorlic as Mufti. Zilkic and his competing Islamic Community of Serbia were to blame for instigating division in the community, Dudic said. There could be no compromise with Zilkic, Dudic insisted.

17. (SBU) Local Serb politicians in Novi Pazar see the existence of Islamic fundamentalism, known locally as Wahhabism, as the main security threat to the region. Veselinovic told us that the United States should help Serbia in the "Christian fight against radical Islam." Sandzak's Bosniaks, on the contrary, believe Wahhabism's importance and influence on the security situation had been blown out of proportion. Kucevic insisted that the issue of Islamic fundamentalism in the region had been created by Serbia's security services to exploit and divide Serbia's Islamic community in an unstable environment.

Nova Varos: Regional Potential

18. (SBU) On the opposite side of Serbia's Sandzak region in the predominantly Serb town of Nova Varos, local leaders are trying to revitalize the municipality, hoping their new links to the national

government will pay dividends. Following municipal elections, the DS, SDP, Socialists (SPS), and NS-Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO), formed a governing coalition controlling 14 out of 27 seats in the municipal assembly. New mayor Slavisa Puric (DS) said that for the first time in nearly 20 years Nova Varos had a municipal government that closely resembled the national government. Puric said he was working closely with the former municipal government, which had been led by Branislav Dilparic (SPS), who was now assembly speaker. Both Puric and Dilparic told us on July 22 that the municipality intended to proceed with previous plans to turn Nova Varos into an eco- and ethno-tourism destination. Unlike in the past, however, they were hopeful that the municipality would now receive adequate attention and funds from the national government, especially the Infrastructure Ministry currently controlled by SPS.

Sjenica/Prijepolje/Priboj

¶9. (U) While Novi Pazar, Tutin and Nova Varos are all banking on their new connections in Belgrade, other municipalities in the Sandzak have yet to form local governments or have sided with the Radicals, placing them in political limbo. The Muslim majority town of Sjenica formed an assembly on July 24, but a power struggle between SDA and SDP has prevented the formation of a municipal government. A divided electorate in the ethnically mixed town of Prijepolje resulted in political stalemate; new elections must be held within six months. In the overwhelmingly Serb majority town of Priboj on the border with Bosnia, leaders have formed an SRS-led assembly and government, which will likely limit attention and assistance from the DS-led central government.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) Recent municipal elections have provided an opportunity for the Sandzak region to address the social and economic challenges it faces and become a more integral part of Serbia. Despite the rosy predictions of both old and new political leaders in the region, however, the Sandzak faces an uphill battle to maintain its security and achieve economic stability. The fact that many of these political parties are now on the same team at both the national and local levels helps that cause, but is not a panacea. Local leaders will have to work hard to capitalize on the elections by addressing the external and internal disputes, particularly within the Islamic community, that have long plagued the region. End Comment.

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